



# Latin and Greek in London E17

by David Hogg

Some years back, the English department for which I was Head of Key Stage 3 found that, due to a timetabling issue, Year 7s had an extra hour of English per fortnight. It seemed like a waste of an opportunity to pad this extra hour out with ‘more of the same’, so I made a decision to utilise that hour to teach something different - grammar.

My own delivery of grammar teaching was not confident. It was a topic that I had not been taught during my own English GCSE and it confused the hell out of me during French lessons. During my English Language A Level, I had been taught terms like ‘relative clause’ and ‘subordinating conjunction’ for the first time and it was this hazy memory that I harked back to when I taught grammar points in my English lessons. The importance of being able to dissect the English language in a grammatical fashion stayed with me from my A Level days and I strongly believed that if my students could talk about English using the language of grammar, they would be more empowered as writers and readers (especially when it came to speaking about ‘Writer’s choices’).

Five years have now passed since this ‘grammar’ idea was mooted and it has since evolved into something very different: we now teach Latin in my school. The thinking was that if I perhaps observed some Latin teaching, I could learn how grammar is taught away from the subjectivity of English grammar. This then mutated into learning the Latin

language itself and has since grown into teaching Latin GCSE. There have been many trials, tribulations and triumphs along the way, but there is no way that I could have foreseen what would happen at the start.

I remember at the beginning of the idea feeling very much like I was out on a limb, floating along somewhere on my own. We seemed to be swimming against the tide of popular consensus. Latin seemed to be in its final throes as a state school subject and ancient Greek was all but dead (and whilst this project has been running in my school, the last non-selective state school in the country dropped A Level ancient Greek). However, this downturn seemed to add a benevolent edge to what we were attempting to do – not only would we be bringing the Classics to a state school, but we would also be contributing to keeping Classics in the state sector alive!

To begin the process we asked our excellent bid-writer Pam Ereira to apply for funding from the charity *Classics for All*. I had heard about the work of this charity on ITV’s *London Tonight* and I felt that we were a match for their funding remit. Pam’s bid-writing was a success, and we soon had access to a sum of money that allowed me to adopt a new *persona* at work - that of Latin student.

Next, we hired an amazing Latin tutor, Róisín Thérèse, who hot-housed me over the course of a few weeks to the point where I felt that I could start delivering a lunchtime club to Year 7

pupils - and that is what happened: Latin crept quietly onto our school curriculum.

The subject was brought to the attention of visitors, including Ofsted (Ofsted, 2016) and parents; but there was always the question mark of ‘What will it become?’ Would we be able to realise our ambitions in an educational climate that seems to be dropping subjects, not introducing them. There was also a lot of pressure on my shoulders to ‘do my homework’ as I was the only person able to deliver the subject in the school. I ought to note that this is *not* a good way to create a sustainable Latin department - if too much dependency is placed on one member of staff, the subject becomes vulnerable to that individual’s career choices and perhaps even their personal circumstances. But, at the start, it was ‘needs must’ and I was very happy to steer the ship in these early choppy waters.

As difficult as I found the subject, I was motivated to persevere through the hardships of learning and simultaneously teaching a new language for several reasons. Firstly, when *The Times* contacted the school and wrote an article about why we thought teaching this subject was worthwhile (*The Times*, 2015), I knew that we were doing something different and this could only be a good thing for our pupils. Secondly, the people involved in the world of Classics were inspirational and so generous with their time. We have been treated to free lectures from Peter Jones, Natalie Haynes and Charlotte Higgins and our pupils have been invited

to the wonderful Kallos Gallery in central London to view some unbelievable classical art close-up. It just seemed that whatever we needed, we got: such is the passion and belief in their subject that Classicists have, they have an almost proselytising zeal for their subject and that means (unusually for a teacher in a state school) people just said 'Yes' to everything. With such great people and organisations willing to support, how could I not feel motivated, and perhaps even empowered?

Finally, I started to believe in the power of the subject (a belief that continues to grow with each new topic I learn). I have heard the arguments for Latin aiding modern foreign languages and how it supports English vocabulary, but the argument that I rarely hear is that Classics is a cornerstone for our artistic heritage. You cannot read Shakespeare without coming across a Greek allusion, or walk through London's National Gallery without seeing the world of Ancient Rome brought to vivid life. As an English teacher, I began to feel cheated by my own lack of classical knowledge and I was determined that my students of English would no longer be deprived of the classical allusions that were intended to be seen by our own great authors. As I type this, I am reminded of today's Year 9 lesson where we discussed Eddie's fall from favour in *A View From the Bridge* in relation to Julius Caesar's thirst for glory, whilst simultaneously discussing Alfieri's role as a Greek 'chorus' and his mention of the oracle at Delphi. I would not have been able to deliver these ideas five years ago – I was ignorant of the references. I am now a better English teacher and my students are better students of English.

With the subject's momentum maintained through the hard times and Latin gaining a foothold in the school's curriculum, the next inspiring moment on this journey occurred - three other teachers volunteered to study the subject (Judith Tyrell, Sharon Morgan and Corinne Feuille) so that they too could deliver lessons. This was an important moment. Not only did it stop the school's over-reliance on me, but it also added more weight to the claim that this was now a 'proper subject' at our school. We had a department! The three other volunteers demonstrate the diverse approaches that Latin can inspire. We now had two English teachers, one French

teacher and one maths teacher delivering the subject, which meant that we had enough staff to start the delivery of the subject to more pupils in more year groups. What we also had was a range of different teaching approaches that were brought into the lessons from our main subject backgrounds. I think we are still finding a balance between the styles that we are familiar with and the demands of the Latin course, but I feel that we are finding a way that works and that the pupils enjoy. Having a range of teaching approaches is a benefit to the subject.

This was not 'job done' though. We still had to carry on building the subject and embedding it into the curriculum gradually. A conveyor belt was in place – our Year 7 Latin students became Year 8 Latin students and we then had another Year 7 group set up. Following this pattern over the course of five years, we now have Latin being delivered to students in Years 7-11. Significantly, this year sees five students sit their Latin GCSE at Kelmscott for the first time – nearly five years after they set out onto this journey into the unknown in Year 7. This is an incredible achievement by everyone involved, because it was and continues to be a difficult subject to deliver due to a myriad of factors, as I shall detail below.

Our staff's 'Skills Base' for the subject is important to acknowledge. None of the teachers that are delivering Latin had a GCSE in Latin when they started teaching this subject. We are all Qualified Teachers, but Latin is not our specialism. Therefore, we have been racing ahead to maintain a suitable distance between our own subject knowledge and what the pupils are being taught. We have maintained this distance by teaching ourselves, supporting each other and hiring tutors in our own time. One of our number sat the GCSE last year (graded with A\*) and 2 more of us have sat it this May (fingers crossed for more A\* grades). We are getting the skills that we need. This has not been helped however by the examination board's changing of the set text for Prose Literature (without accredited translations) and the lack of practice papers available for the Literature units. This is the one area that really slows down independent learning and in my view should be addressed as soon as possible if the subject hopes to encourage more non-

specialists to teach the subject. Simply producing and providing us non-specialists with an endorsed translation would be a great start!

Having a willing and able group of Latin teachers does not guarantee success. The subject still needs students. Latin is introduced as lunchtime club in Year 7, but from Year 8 onwards, it is timetabled. It is compulsory for selected pupils until the end of Year 9 (when students choose their option subjects). We are now in our third year of offering this option and we have always had students that select the Latin option. However, we are always worried that we will not have enough students who choose the subject to make it financially viable to run. The current financial constraints on state schools mean that the number of students has to be large in order to generate the supply of the teaching. In a perfect world, my current Year 10 (six pupils) would have Latin as part of their timetable three to four times a week. As it is, they are being taught for one hour a week, after school. They have volunteered for this additional GCSE and they are working incredibly hard to cover the course in the reduced teaching time that they have. The decision to ask these pupils to work after school is not taken lightly and the fact that we cannot offer them a timetabled class is a result of the financial cuts all state schools are now having to make. Current cutbacks mean that by 2019 my school needs to make savings of £619,876 (this is the equivalent of losing 14 teachers or cuts to student funding of £716 per pupil). This means that Latin will continue to be on the 'endangered' list as budgets get squeezed tighter and tighter. The sad fact is that after all we have done to change the 'elitist' view of Classics by teaching it in a multicultural state school it is likely that only the private schools will be able to afford to provide it in the future.

So far though, the hurdles are not becoming barriers. In fact, we are continuing to grow as a department, thanks to the continuing support of our Senior Leadership Team, especially our Deputy Head Lucy Dalton who has championed this initiative from the start. This year, with one eye on the future of the school and one eye on our own progression as professionals, we (staff) started learning ancient Greek. We currently have weekly Classical Greek lessons. Greek has brought some new

teachers into the 'Kelmscott Classics Department' - again this is evidence of the subject's sprawling appeal. We are not quite sure where this embryonic subject will lead, but there is enthusiasm for some of us teachers to sit the GCSE in May 2018 and to find a way to deliver it in school to the pupils. Ultimately we have a vision that there will one day be a pupil from our school who will sit the Classical Greek GCSE. The success of the Latin course has shown that this possible. There is definitely a will, we now need to work out the way.

The Latin teachers have also begun studying for the A Level. We do not have a sixth form here, but we have a thirst for the subject knowledge and professional development. Students also like the idea that they 'learn from the learners': we have always been very open about who is teaching the teachers. Like the Greek, this is about mining potential - we do not yet know what will come of it, but we do know that whatever happens will only be positive.

It has been a very enriching experience to work and study with colleagues in this way. Very rarely in this profession do we find ourselves working together as 'equals' (such is the hierarchical structure in a school and the range of subjects taught). But through engaging with this challenge, we have managed to turn the school into a place of learning for us too. It has thrown together people who would not normally have to work with each other and a side-product of this is that we are sharing good practice from across the curriculum (which is also a benefit to Latin and to our 'home' subjects). It has also been a reminder of just how much pressure our pupils are under when sitting their exams. The content of the Latin course seemed to take up most of my spare time in the evening. I managed, but I shudder at the thought of multiplying that workload by ten and squeezing another ten GCSEs into my life. Yet this is what we ask our pupils to do. Latin has therefore taught me empathy.

Latin has also shown me what we as professionals are capable of. We have started a subject from nothing and built it into a model of excellent practice. We have adapted a school curriculum to fit a subject in that has never been part of our curriculum before. We have learnt how we learn and want to learn more! We have

also seen that Latin and Classics still have a place in the state system and that the students demand access to it.

Nowhere was this demand more clearly demonstrated than in a pupil called Charli Kelly. Charli was a year too old to join the Latin project from the beginning, but had received some introductory lessons from a trainee teacher. She wanted to carry the subject on and sat in lunchtime classes and received some lunchtime tuition. As she went into KS4, she made it clear that she wanted to sit her GCSE and the school found the funds to supply her with a tutor - on a Saturday! Charli worked incredibly hard to complete a Latin GCSE qualification in her own time over the course of two years (as well as all of her other GCSEs). Charli received a grade A\* and was accepted into a prestigious local sixth form college. Once there, Charli excelled and we have been told that Charli will continue to study Classics at university. Charli was the first student from Kelmscott to sit a GCSE in Latin and she has now continued on this pathway to University. If that does not prove the worth of this subject being taught in a state school, I am not sure what does.

I once heard Cambridge Professor Mary Beard call Classics a 'lightning rod subject' and she is absolutely right. Those that do not think that these subjects are worth teaching neglect to see past the idea of learning a 'dead language'. During the Brexit referendum and the subsequent fall-out, Boris Johnson, the Foreign Secretary, made a reference to the European Union and Ancient Rome. This is a reference that would have been understood (though not necessarily agreed with) by a few and ignored by many and is another example of how the 'elitism' of Classics may exclude the electorate. That, however, is not the subject's fault. It is the fault of the system that excluded the electorate from learning the reference in the first place. Time and time again the world of Classics reveals itself in places that I have been looking in for many years, yet never saw the reference. I have taught *Macbeth* for an eternity now, but it was only a few years ago that I realised that when he says 'pluck out mine eyes', he is making an Oedipal reference. Suddenly that quote is not just about self-loathing and guilt. Now the quote becomes a reference to a father-figure that has been killed by a son.

This is not just a regicide, it is a patricide and the murder of parents (and their children) continues throughout the play. By ignoring the Classical influences in our own literary canon, we start the process of plucking out our own eyes.

Yet, it is not just in discussions about politics or in the 'Literary canon' where the echoes of Greece and Rome are being missed by our pupils. The series of books / movies called *The Hunger Games* is a teen-lit sensation. Pupils have loved those books, but even those children who devoured them are often painfully unaware of even the most overt Classical reference. Katniss's link to Latin is perhaps not the most obvious so perhaps that is understandable - but should they know who Seneca was? None of the pupils in my school would be able to infer anything from that name and yet, when they are told of its significance, they are genuinely amazed and feel part of something that they had previously been excluded from. *The Hunger Games* is a great example of how modern popular culture can be used to teach Classics. Its narrative arc follows that of perhaps the most notorious Greek tragedy - *Oedipus*. At the start of the story, Katniss intervenes in fate when her little sister is chosen to take part in the murderous Hunger Games. Thinking that she is protecting her from certain death, Katniss volunteers in her place; hence, she tries to change her sister's fate. Yet, by taking part in these games, she starts off a chain reaction, which leads to a revolution, which at the end of the third book causes the death of her sister. Fate cannot be cheated. It would be my desire that one day my pupils would see these references to the Classical world, without needing them all to be pointed out. It is simply not fair that one group of children get to experience these Classical nuances, whereas another group are not even aware that they have been excluded from the subtleties in the first place.

I think that the final word on the success of this project should be left to students and their parents. Students have said 'It has increased my understanding of the English Language' and 'It is intellectually stimulating'. They have felt that 'It opens up opportunities for me' and '[It] can help me with my CV'. They have felt that 'Latin has helped me with French' and 'It pushes you to your full ability'. Encouragingly 'It is also quite fun'. Wisely

they feel that 'If a pupil is willing to take on challenges and push themselves, then it is a great use of time and effort' and 'Saying you have studied Latin or know Latin is impressive'. But perhaps most usefully 'Latin pops up... in TV shows and movies, like *Sherlock*,' and 'Latin teaches you more than a language. It is history, politics, art, food, culture and so much more.' Their parents do not disagree. They think that it is 'A great

opportunity' and that 'It's brilliant that Kelmscott has such a wide range of opportunities like this. It's great. The enthusiasm of the teachers has been key to her [the child's] enjoyment.'

Latin = engagement = enjoyment.

**David Hogg is a Latin and English teacher at Kelmscott School, London.  
d.hogg@kelmscott.waltham.sch.uk**

## References

Ofsted. (2016). *Ofsted Report for Kelmscott Academy*. London: Ofsted.

*The Times*. (2015, July 25). When in E17, do as the Romans do.